

DESIGN RESEARCH SEMINAR

# **HAND PAINTED SIGNAGE OF NEW DELHI**

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Visual Communication

**GUIDE:**  
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**IDC, IIT BOMBAY  
DECEMBER 2015**

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# APPROVAL SHEET

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The Design Research Seminar  
**“Visual Grammar of Street Signage”**  
By Kanika Kaul  
M.Des Visual Communication 2014-2016

is approved as a partial fulfilment of requirements of a post graduate degree  
in Visual Communication at IDC, IIT Bombay.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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First & foremost, I would like to thank Prof. G V Sreekumar for his unwavering guidance and unparalleled feedback in this project. Without him, this project would lack focus and finesse.

I would also like to thank my Visual Communication batch of 14-16 for their support, jokes & general good-will throughout our projects.

Lastly, I would like to thank my friends and family for their unconditional support and understanding throughout my stressed out moments.

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# ABSTRACT

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This report documents hand painted street signage in some parts of New Delhi and analyses the visual design decisions made by the artists.

As graphic design students, an understanding of visual communication principles is critical for enhanced design choices. Observing the same choices as made by untrained artists and the impact of their decisions give us a more appreciative view of their craft.

Some examples of interesting signage and beautiful technique are presented in this report, as well as insights from an interview with a practicing, established signboard painter in Chawri Bazaar, an area of Old Delhi.

This project was undertaken at the Industrial Design Centre, IIT Bombay in December 2015 and was guided by Prof. G V Sreekumar.

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# INTRODUCTION

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Think 'India', and among the brightly colored vivid imagery that comes to mind includes our kitschy, unique hand painted signage. Trucks and shop fronts elaborately and laboriously decorated by hand-working artists are a part of India's celebrated visual vernacular.

The advent of quicker alternatives in the form of less aesthetically pleasing flex canopies designed by over-worked & untrained DTP operators will soon replace a tradition of hand painted signage, and we might just lose an impactful part of what makes up a quintessential Indian aesthetic.

The purpose of this project is to delve into the world of hand painted signage, observe examples of the same in our surroundings and try to analyse the visual design decisions made by the artists and the message communicated. Several parts of New & Old Delhi contain many examples of hand-painted signage in a variety of roles: as directional aids, in shop fronts, with multiple

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scripts seamlessly integrated, as freehand scribbles on passing doors, or with flourishes and quirks as per as the artists' discretion.

For this project, signs were documented, then analysed and categorized based on their purpose, and visual design. Not only did a host of categories emerge, but alongside, insights about the design process of these works of art and their impact were also noted.

A greater sense of appreciation was inculcated in us by noticing finer details in the typography and images on these signs. It was also a chance to document a tradition that is facing extinction due to advancement in technological processes.

Image source: [handpaintedtype.com](http://handpaintedtype.com)



## CATEGORY 1: **NUMERIC SIGNAGE**

Numeric signage was found in the form of apartment numbers and informative signs that are wholly contextual and have a small audience. The numbers are either painted in a stencil technique where they are spray-painted, or using simple guidelines to ensure a constant letterform height.

Image 1: Apartment numbers using stencil technique.

Image 2: Stencil technique used for numbers as well as 2 scripts.

Image 3: Mentions numbers of apartments down the street.

Image 4: Community trashcan.

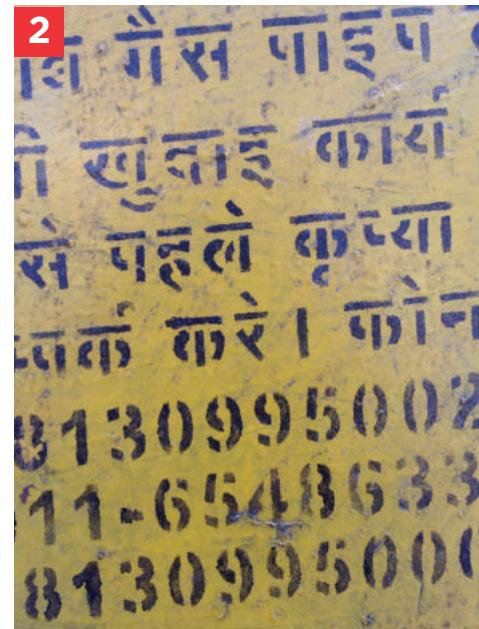


Image 1: Apartment numbers using guidelines.

Image 2: Stencil technique.

Image 3: Inexplicable numbers on a phone lines booth.



## CATEGORY 1: NUMERIC SIGNAGE

Image 1: Free hand house number.

Image 2: Guidelines used for numbers.

Image 3: Inexplicable numbers on wall of community garbage area.

Image 4: Apartment numbers using stencil technique.



## CATEGORY 1: NUMERIC SIGNAGE

Image 1: Freehand painted numbers next to parking lot.

Image 2: Guidelines used for numbers.

Image 3: Stretched typography.

Image 4: Freehand numbers outside a watertank.



## CATEGORY 2: DIRECTIONAL SIGNAGE

Directional signage uses arrows and similar visual elements to give information regarding directions and routes. In that sense, they have universal meaning across signs using varied languages and scripts.

In some cases, the arrows are decorated, or used in different ways other than a regular filled-in shape (which is the most common).

Image 1: The arrow is made up of a line of text, with the two ends intact.

Image 2: Regular arrow outside travel agent.

Image 3: The arrow indicates two directional shifts in one.

Image 4: Sign outside metal store in Old Delhi.

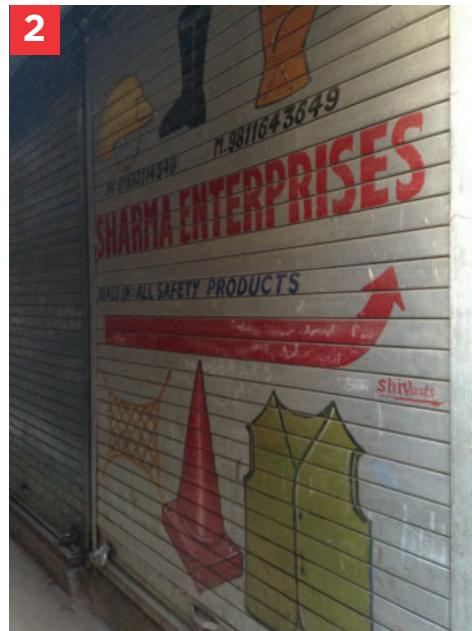


Image 1: Arrow outside beauty parlor in local market in South Delhi.

Image 2: The route is slightly curved, the arrow indicates that.

Image 3: Sign outside public bathroom.

Image 4: Decorative arrow for small jewellery store.



## CATEGORY 2: DIRECTIONAL SIGNAGE

Image 1: The ikar matra cuts through the arrow beautifully.

Image 2: Curved path to shop is indicated in the arrow.

Image 3: Decorative arrows in Old Delhi.



## CATEGORY 2: DIRECTIONAL SIGNAGE

Image 1: Arrows on a small mobile repair shop in South Delhi.

Image 2: Arrow outside photo stat shop.

Image 3: The shape of the concrete sign is itself directional. The red corner is a further visual clue.



## CATEGORY 3: **MULTI-LINGUAL SIGNAGE**

Multilingual signs are interesting to study because of the interaction of different scripts, transliteration, reinforced meaning and the visual treatments they are given that may vary. In Delhi, mainly bi-lingual signage is observed, however in Old Delhi (that has a large Urdu-reading population) one can see instances of trilingual signage as well.



Image 1: The Devanagari text is not given the same shadow as the Latin, thus creating information hierarchy.

Image 2: In this case, the two sets of text are unrelated, and there is no transliteration.



Image 1: Trilingual sign in Old Delhi. The 3D treatment of the Urdu script creates clear hierarchy.

Image 2: Bi-lingual sign in Chawri Bazaar.

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#### CATEGORY 4:

## TEXT & IMAGE

Signage that utilises both typography and imagery is used to reinforce meaning and creates visual interest. In shop fronts, it is used as a visual aid to convey what is the product that is sold there. The images can be graphic and symbolic, or realistic and highly rendered; in all cases they are a delightful addition to any sign.

Image 1: Graphic representation of the different kinds of wire mesh sold at the shop.

Image 2: The artist has used the wire mesh textures as both a representation of the product & an interesting visual element.

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Image 1: A realistic representation of a ladder and bolts.

Image 2: A shop specializing in safety equipment has interesting visuals to advertise the product along with decorative type with flourishes and diagonal black-letter elements.



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## CATEGORY 4: TEXT & IMAGE

Image 1: A realistic representation of a water valve.

Image 2: Illustration of a spray gun outside a small repair shop.

Image 3 & 4: Safety equipment.

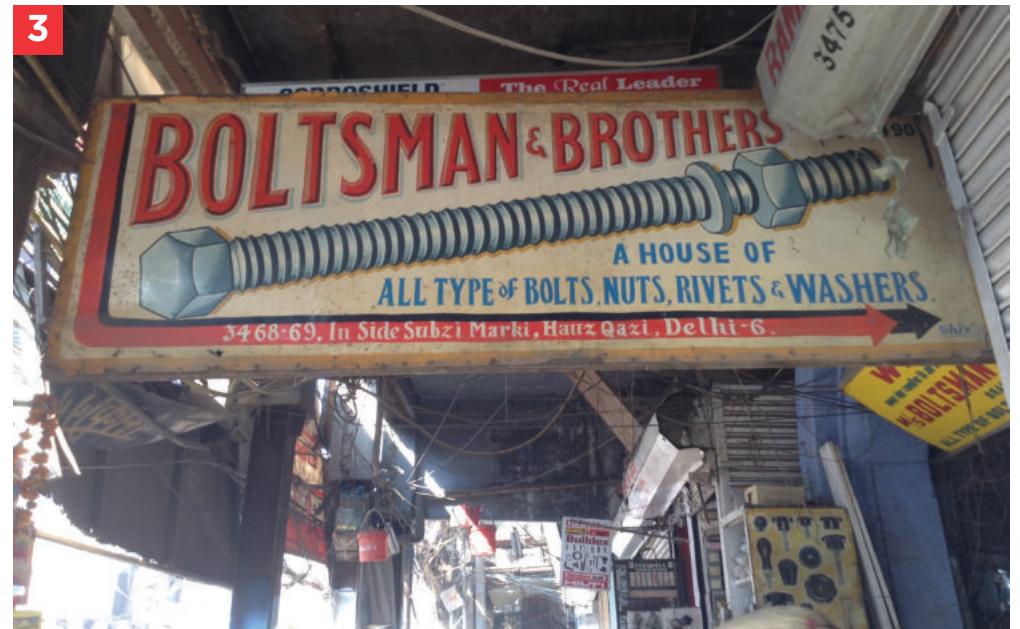
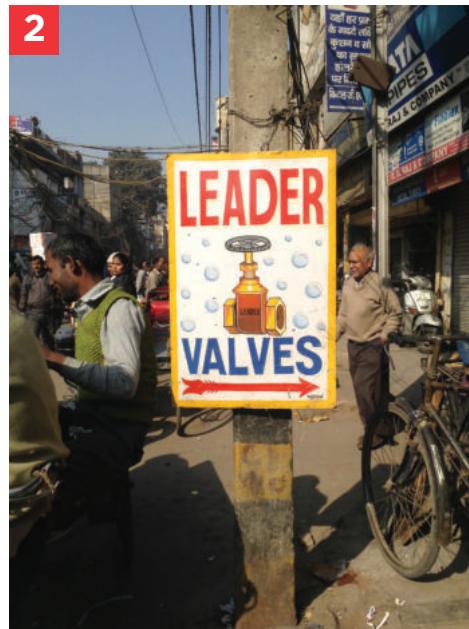


Image 1: Illustrations of nuts and bolts.

Image 2: Rendered painting of a valve.

Image 3: Interesting interaction of typography and imagery.

## CATEGORY 4: TEXT & IMAGE



## CATEGORY 4: TEXT & IMAGE

Image 1: Separate signs with same illustrations but different scripts for the same shop.

Image 2: Representation of a saw blade.

Image 3: Use of ribbons for typography.



#### CATEGORY 4: TEXT & IMAGE

Image 1: Large wall painted with illustrations of building equipment.

Image 2: Close up of the same wall, showing wear and tear. People also stick bills on these walls.



## CATEGORY 5: SHOP FRONT SIGNAGE

Shopfront signage is a way for the shopowners to represent their business in an expressive way. They vary greatly in their use of color, typography and visual elements, depending on the discretion of the artist and the demands of the client.

Many variations were seen across Delhi, using interesting techniques to create hierarchy of information and treatment of typography.

Image 1: Bold, strong 3D typography.

Image 2: Imagery and bi-lingual signage.

Image 3: Simple serif type.

Image 4: 3D typography.



Image 1: Serious typography, probably since it is a doctor's clinic.

Image 2: 3D title.

Image 3: Bi-lingual sign on wall.

Image 4: Bold color for attention.



## CATEGORY 6: FREEHAND SIGNAGE

Instances of hand-painted signage seemingly without any guidelines or visual design decisions were found in local markets of Delhi, mostly painted by shopowners or employees themselves. Painted arrows and handwritten letterforms add personality and a human touch: hasty, messy and interesting to study.

Image 1: Photostat booth in local market in South Delhi. The owner painted it on a Sunday afternoon.

Image 2: Signs outside small shop in Chandni Chowk.

Image 3: Directional signage found in Chawri Bazaar.

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Image 1: Sign painted by owner because he could not afford a painter.



Image 1: Mr. Rajiv Mehta at his desk.

Image 2: Pigments and paints in his shop.

Image 3: A self-portrait painted by Mr. Mehta, put up next to his table.

INTERVIEW:

## SHIV ARTS

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In the winding lanes of Chawri Bazaar, Old Delhi, you can find Shiv Arts, a small signboard painting shop run by an enthusiastic Mr. Rajiv Mehta. He has been in the business for many years, preceded by his grandfather and father. He is an artist, trained in fine art painting, and creates handpainted signage as well as digital flex prints.

I asked him about his design process - how do clients brief him, how does he take design decisions - as well as questions about his business - do people prefer flex prints to handpainted signs, is handpainted signage able to sustain in this digital age?

Being a trained fine art painter, Mr. Mehta said his family business has a good name in Old Delhi, and shopowners trust both his skill and judgement when it comes to creating signs for them. They provide the information they want on the sign, and Mr. Mehta creates a thumbnail version of the sign to plot the hierarchy of information and allocation of space to different pieces of text and imagery. Once he has

done this, he roughly pencils out the design on the metal sheet and then goes over it with paint. He uses guidelines to ensure uniform text height and uses certain techniques like giving a light shadow to the headings and titles, adding ornamental swashes in between lines of text to separate them.

In cases where the client asks for a flex sign, Mr. Mehta makes the creative digitally on Adobe Photoshop. He taught himself the software using online tutorials once the demand for flex prints began to rise, and he realised just handpainted signage would not help him sustain his business.

Mr. Mehta said people prefer handpainted signage for a variety of reasons like a) the signs last longer than flex prints; handpainted signs on metal sheets are required to be changed only once every few years due to rust and fading, whereas flex prints are more easily damaged and b) it happens infrequently, but handpainted signs can be easily fixed in case of a mistake, typo or a change of information. Mr. Mehta

noted the rise in the demand of flex prints only in the past 4 - 5 years, and added digital signs in his list of services soon thereafter.

It was interesting to speak to a signboard painter, to ask him about his craft and his design process. Asking him about design decisions and finding similarities in my process and his was insightful. Assumptions I had about handpainted signage were challenged, and I gained a sense of appreciation for this craft.



## OBSERVATIONS:

# QUIRKS OF THE SCRIPT

Handpainted signage is an art in itself, and there are many examples found where you can see artistic flair and some interesting variations of scripts. Stretched letterforms, multiple shadows, blackletter inspired elements, gradient color are some styles I saw around Delhi. Interestingly, it is not always that the legibility is compromised: in most cases the typography is enhanced by these techniques.

Image 1: Stretched Latin letterforms with gradient color fills.

Image 2: Two tone shadows.

Image 3: Blackletter elements.

Image 4: Shirorekha is stylised.



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This report documents hand painted street signage in some parts of New Delhi and analyses the visual design decisions made by the artists.

As graphic design students, an understanding of visual communication principles is critical for enhanced design choices. Observing the same choices as made by untrained artists give us a more appreciative view of their craft.

Image 1: Shadow given to the typography.

Image 2: Interesting treatment with light shadows and gradient color.



## OBSERVATIONS: QUIRKS OF THE SCRIPT

Image 1: Latin letterforms warped to create space for image.

Image 2 & 3: Blackletter elements.

Image 4: Shirorekha is stylised.



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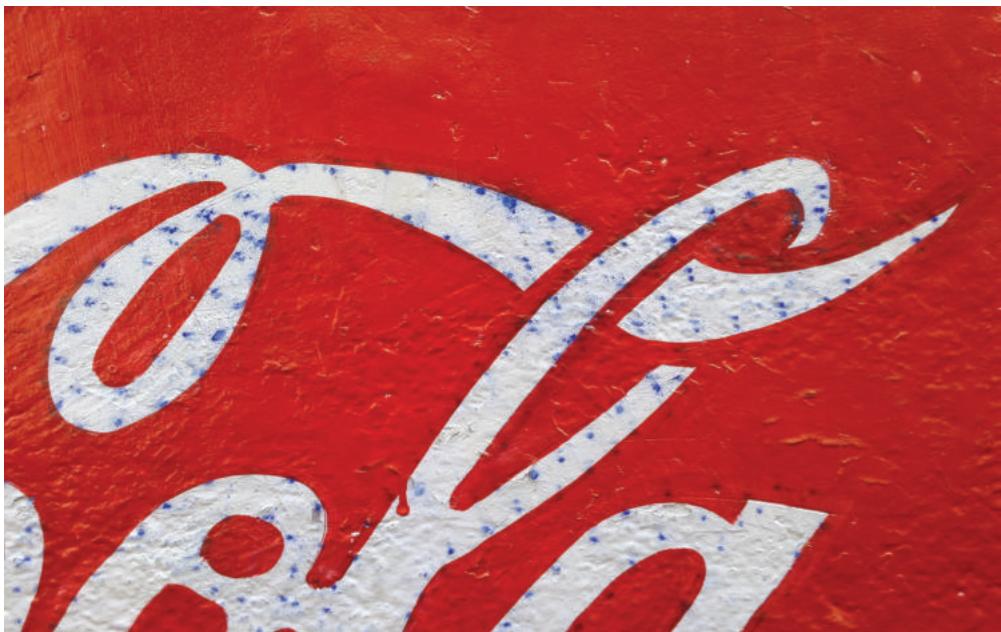


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Image 1: Interesting matras and serifs.

Image 2: Ornamental element on shopfront.

## OBSERVATIONS: QUIRKS OF THE SCRIPT



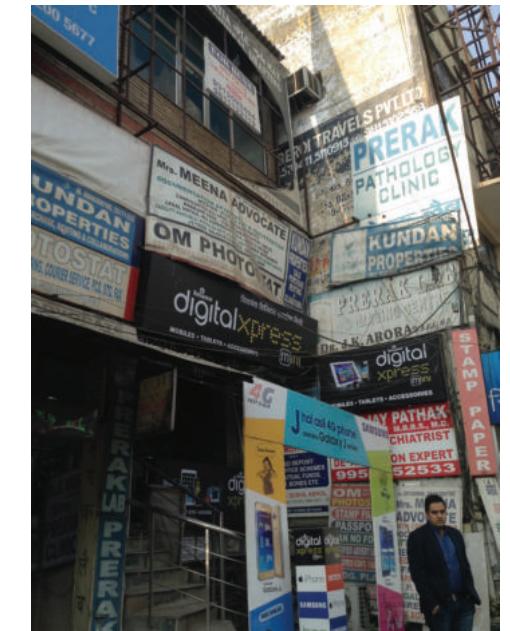
## OBSERVATIONS: **TECHNIQUE**

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During my time in Delhi observing signage, I came across some examples where the technique used by the artists was visible. In this case, the shape of the iconic Coca Cola logo is marked with a series of blue dots using a stencil, which are used as the guidelines for the paint. Seeing examples such as these where the process was observable was exciting and insightful.



The most popular method used to ensure uniform letters and spacing is shown above: using pencil lines as guidelines for letter x-height and kerning. The letterforms are also first marked out in pencil to prevent mistakes, and then the artist paints over the faint lines. Surprisingly, the same method is not used for the ornamental elements around the sign; they are freehand.



## OBSERVATIONS:

# VISUAL CHAOS

One observation that was impossible to miss was the information overload presented to viewers in many situations in local markets, streets and alleyways. Entrances to office buildings are covered in different signs; it all merges into one giant mass of information, thus making sure the viewer is encumbered with visual chaos and not able to process information readily.

## OBSERVATIONS:

# LEARNINGS & INSIGHTS

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Walking through the streets of Delhi, camera in hand, I learnt about India's celebrated visual culture. It was a way to document a practice that is slowly being pushed out of existence by faster, digital alternatives, at the cost of losing part of India's charm.

Talking to Mr. Mehta of Shiv Arts was another enriching experience I went through as part of this project. Having gone through both an undergrad and Masters Degree in Visual Communication, it was engaging to speak to another person in the same trade who approaches his work in such a different manner. He was a jovial man, passionate about his craft, and insistent on sustaining his business through scary prospects that put the future of handpainted signage in questionable circumstances.

I gained a deeper sense of appreciation for typography and visual design, as well as noticing and observing certain characteristics of handpainted signage that I was otherwise oblivious to: its quirks, techniques utilized by artists to create hierarchy, balance and beauty in their work.

A great learning point for me was noticing how artists play with the letterforms wherein the meaning is not lost yet the characters are infused with personality and creativity. The difference in the swashes and construction of the letterform varies but it is not misinterpreted. For example:



Monolinear 'ਤ'



'ਤ' on food stall



'ਤ' on shopfront

This project was a great opportunity for me to delve into a world of visual communication that I did not notice or glance at twice before. Now, after understanding and documenting this craft, I have come to appreciate the field, this process and these hard-working people more than ever before.

